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ABSTRACT

Differences in sex role expectations between parents of female college freshmen and male college freshmen were investigated. It was hypothesized that parents of entering college freshman women would be less likely than parents of entering freshman men to agree on expectations for their child and on sex role expectations in general, and that young women would be influenced by the conflicting expectation messages which they received from parents, and would experience difficulty in formulating stable, consistent expectations for themselves. Data from mailed questionnaires, returned by 955 parents of entering freshmen at a southeastern state university, supported the research hypothesis. Parents of the female students were much less likely than the parents of the male students to agree on expectations for their child and on role expectations in general. Further, it was found that both the mothers and the fathers were inconsistent in their respective expectations for daughters. Large percentages of the female students' parents supported strong academic-vocational achievements for women, yet also identified women's major responsibilities in a traditional way. (Author)

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Freshman University Women Receive Inconsistent "Expectation Messages" from Parents

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Freshman University Women Receive Inconsistent "Expectation Messages" from Parents

The family, as the major socializing institution in our society, plays a crucial role in influencing the aspirations of youth. Many studies show a positive relationship between parents' expectations and encouragement and their children's educational goals and achievements (Alexander, Eckland, and Griffin, 1975; Hout and Morgan, 1975; Kahl, 1953; Marini, 1978; Penn and Gabriel, 1976; Rehberg and Westby, 1967; Sewell and Shah, 1968; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf, 1970; Williams, 1972; Wilson and Portes, 1975). Further, studies show that parents influence their sons' and daughters' educational plans by their views on role expectations for men and women. Parents often express higher aspirations for boys (Marini, 1978) and are perceived by their children as having higher expectations for their sons than for their daughters (Boocock, 1972; Dickerson and Hinkle, 1978; Goodale and Hall, 1974). It also appears that the parental support and encouragement which girls receive is not as constant over time as that which boys receive (Williams, 1972).

As girls reach maturity, they typically exhibit lower levels of self-confidence than men (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), and female achievement motiviation becomes an illusive quality which comes and goes (Alper, 1974). After an extensive review of studies related to achievement motivation in women, Stein and Bailey (1976) noted that, as young women reach adulthood, there is pressure to adhere to feminine role definitions which encourage women to internalize the lower expectations of the culture for continued achievement. If a young woman has diminished, vascillating expectations for herself, can these be a reflection of the conflicting messages she has received on what is appropriate for women? Bettelheim (1962) suggested that since we set such strangely contradictory goals for young women, it is to be expected that they would have difficulty finding deep satisfactions and self-realizations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate potentially conflicting expectations which a young woman receives from her parents. The expectations of the mothers and the fathers of young women were examined, and for comparison, the expectations of the mothers and the fathers of young men were also examined. The premise of the study was that the mothers and the fathers of young men were more likely to have similar expectations for their child than would be the case for the mothers and the fathers of young women. The research hypothesis is that the parents of young women are less likely to agree with each other on the expectations for their child, therefore creating a climate in the home which makes it difficult for young women to formulate stable, consistent expectations for themselves.

Method

The sample of parents for the study was drawn by using the names of entering freshmen at a southeastern state university. Student names were chosen from four colleges, intentionally representing both traditional and non-traditional areas for women; they were arts and sciences, home economics, engineering, and business. For the initial sample from each college, the student names were randomly chosen within each sex, to include 75 percent women and 25 percent men. In home economics, the limited male enrollment did not permit this ratio. The parents of 1200 entering freshmen were contacted and asked if they were willing to participate in the study; 679 families agreed. Parents of transfer students were not included, so the final sample was 572 families. This sample included both the couples and single parents with whom the child was currently residing. Questionnaires were sent to the parents approximately one month prior to the time their child would be entering the university. This appeared to be an appropriate time due to the nature of

some of the questions. In the two-parent homes each parent was asked not to confer with the other and was provided with a separate return envelope. A total of 955 parents returned questionnaires. Of this number, 701 were parents of women (325 fathers and 376 mothers) and 254 were parents of men (103 fathers, 121 mothers, and 30 unidentified parents of men. See note later in this paper.).

The questionnaire was developed, based upon the literature and a previous study by Dickerson (1974). The first part of the questionnaire included questions to assess parents' expectations for their child. There were nine questions, but Question 6 was not applicable to parents of men. (See Table 1.) Another sixteen questions were designed to determine the parents' attitudes on various issues related to men's and women's role expectations. (See Table 2.) A form with appropriate wording was developed for parents of women, another for parents of men.

Results

Chi-square analyses were used to test the research hypothesis. When parents' responses to the first nine questions were analyzed, there were no significant differences between the responses of the mothers and the fathers of the entering male freshmen. (See Table 1.) That is, the mothers and the fathers of the men shared similar views on all the questions which pertained to parental expectations for their son. In contrast, there were significant differences between the mothers and the fathers of the women on four of the nine questions from the first portion of the questionnaire. These data indicate that the mothers and the fathers of the female freshmen do not have similar views on these questions which pertained to parental expectations for the daughter. A summary of the analyses for the first set of nine questions is shown in Table 1.

Insert TABLE 1 about here

For those questions where there were significant differences between the fathers and the mothers of entering female students, it is of interest to note some of the response frequencies:

Question 1: 79 percent of the mothers compared to 55 percent of the fathers think a daughter's education is as important as a son's education; while 45 percent of the fathers compared to 21 percent of the mothers think a son's education is more important.

Question 5: 76 percent of the mothers, compared to 59 percent of the fathers, expressed "definitely yes" that their daughters should be able to support themselves for the rest of their life.

Question 6: 70 percent of the mothers, compared to 59 percent of the fathers, said "definitely not" when asked if high achievement would hinder their daughter's chances for marriage.

Question 7: 90 percent of the mothers, compared to 79 percent of the fathers, indicated they have encouraged their daughter to have strong career plans, while 21 percent of the fathers and 10 percent of the mothers said they have encouraged their daughters very little or not at all.

For all these questions, the mothers of the entering female students expressed more positive expectations for their daughters than did the fathers.

When data were analyzed for the sixteen questions which focused on parents' attitudes on various issues related to men's and women's role expectations, even greater attitudinal differences were found than on the first set of questions. For all sixteen questions, there were significant differences between the responses of the mothers and the fathers of the women. Thus, it may be said that the mothers and the fathers of the women have differing views on role expectations. On the other hand, there were significant differences between responses of the mothers and the fathers of the men on only eight of the sixteen questions. The findings from this portion of the questionnaire, like the first set of questions related to parental expectations, indicate that young men are much more apt than the young women to have parents who share similar views and expectations for their child. A summary of the analyses for the second set of questions is shown in Table 2.

Insert TABLE 2 about here

In addition to the fact that there were significant differences between the mothers and the fathers of the women students on all the questions in this set, it may be of interest to note some of the percentage responses to these questions. They are as follows:

Question 1: 13 percent of the mothers and 26 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that education is more important for men; 64 percent of the mothers and 31 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 2: 2 percent of the mothers and 5 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that achievement negates femininity; 86 percent of the mothers and 67 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 3: 24 percent of the mothers and 21 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that men have more need to achieve in a career.

Question 4: 93 percent of the mothers and 87 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree" with the statement that women should not compete with men as university students.

Question 5: 87 percent of the mothers and 74 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree" with the statement that women should not be competitive with men on the job.

Question 6: 21 percent of the mothers and 25 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that young men still have a right to expect their wives to stay home; 49 percent of the mothers and 30 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 7: 60 percent of the mothers and 51 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that a young woman should expect at some point to be supported.

Question 8: 79 percent of the mothers and 67 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that a woman should be able to support herself for the rest of her life.

Question 9: 80 percent of the mothers and 64 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that men should be willing to work for a female supervisor.

Question 10: 46 percent of the mothers and 41 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that a woman's primary responsibility is home and family; 21 percent of the mothers compared to 13 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 11: 42 percent of the mothers and 40 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that a woman should work only if she has time beyond family responsibilities; 24 percent of the mothers and 12 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 12: 44 percent of the mothers and 23 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that the working wife should make child care arrangements; 21 percent of the mothers and 29 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 13: 11 percent of the mothers and 13 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that a woman's ultimate fulfillment is through the accomplishments of a successful husband; 67 percent of the mothers and 46 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 14: 3 percent of the mothers and 8 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that women are unsuited for management positions; 82 percent of the mothers and 56 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 15: 18 percent of the mothers and 14 percent of the fathers "strongly agree" that the divorce rate is

attributed to working women; 52 percent of the mothers and 45 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree".

Question 16: 87 percent of the mothers and 76 percent of the fathers "strongly disagree" that achievement in college will hinder a young woman's chances of marriage.

On many of the questions in this set, the mothers of the women students were more likely than the fathers to express support for greater opportunities for women. For example the mothers are more apt to think that women's education is equally important; that achievement does not negate femininity; that women should compete with men at the university and on the job; that a woman be able to support herself; that men should be willing to work for a female supervisor; that women are suited for management; and that achievement in college will not hinder a young woman's chances of marriage. On the other hand, mothers are also more likely than the fathers to agree strongly with some of the traditional role expectations for women. For example, the mothers are more apt to agree strongly that men have more need to achieve in a career; that a woman should be able to expect to be supported at some point in her life; that a woman's primary responsibility is her home and family; that a woman should work only if she has time beyond family responsibilities; that it is the working wife's responsibility to make child care arrangements; and that the current high divorce rate is due to the fact that there are so many working women.

It is of interest to note that on a few of the attitude questions pertaining to women's changing roles, there were greater frequency counts for mothers in the "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" cells, perhaps indicating a

dichotomy in women's thinking today. In contrast, the fathers' responses were more likely to be in the middle categories on the four-point scale.

In examining some of the inconsistencies for fathers of the female students it was found that many of the fathers still have a number of traditional expectations. For example, approximately 45 percent of the fathers consider education more important for sons than for daughters. Over 21 percent say they have given little or no encouragement to their daughters to have strong vocational plans. When both the "agree" and "strongly agree" categories are counted, 52 percent of the fathers think young men still have a right to expect their wives to stay home and raise a family rather than pursue a career; 65 percent think a wife should work only if she can find time over and above that required for her home and family responsibilities; 27 percent agree that a wife's ultimate fulfillment is through the accomplishments of a successful husband.

On the other hand, the fathers of the female students exhibited rather positive expectations for their daughters (or for women in general) in regard to certain issues. For example, they have more positive views than the mothers of the women students that their daughters will graduate from the university. They also have a more positive view than the mothers that after graduation their daughter would be capable of supervising a group of men in her professional field. On other questions a majority of the fathers think that it is acceptable for women to be competitive with men at the university and on the job; that a woman should be able to support herself for the rest of her life; that men should be willing to work for a female supervisor; that achievement does not negate femininity; and that achievement in college will not hinder a young woman's chances of marriage.

Discussion

The data from the survey support the research hypothesis that the parents of young women are less likely to agree with each other, in comparison to the parents of young men, regarding expectations for their child or for role expectations in general. For each of the two sections of the questionnaire there were more significant differences in the responses of the mothers and the fathers of the female students than there were for the mothers and the fathers of the male students. In looking at the total questionnaire results, there were significant differences between the mothers and the fathers of the women on 80 percent of the items compared to significant differences between the mothers and the fathers of the men on only 33 percent of the items. These data provide a basis for speculating that young women receive very mixed messages within their family regarding expectations for themselves.

Not only do the mothers and fathers of the women differ from each other in their expectations for their daughters (and women in general), but there are also inconsistencies in the views of the fathers and in the views of the mothers. Although mothers tend to be the more positive of the two parents in terms of expectations for their daughters, they exhibit a number of inconsistencies in their role expectations for women. High percentages of the mothers appear to want equal opportunities for their daughters and women in general. They appear to reject some traditional views which limit women, and to indicate support for greater academic-vocational achievements for women. However, some of their answers were in sharp contrast to their views which are supportive of women's academic and career opportunities. The response rates indicated that large percentages of the <u>same</u> mothers hold two sets of views. They believe women should strongly pursue academic-vocational goals; that they should compete with men; and they should achieve in college and in their careers.

At the same time large numbers of the mothers also tend to identify women's major responsibilities as being those of a traditional nature. On some of the questions, the mothers of the female freshmen were more apt than the fathers to support the traditional role orientation for women. The mothers were more likely than the fathers to say that men have more of an inner need to achieve in a career than women; to strongly agree that a woman's primary responsibility is that of looking after her home and family; that a woman should work only if she can find time over and above that required for her home and family responsibilities; and that the high divorce rate these days is due to the fact that so many women are working outside the home. It also appears that the mothers have taken on certain role expectations which may have been "self-imposed." For example, 44 percent of the mothers of the women strongly agree that if a wife works, it is her responsibility to make arrangements for child care; only 23 percent of the fathers see it as her responsibility. (For parents of the male students, 48 percent of the mothers strongly agree, compared to 20 percent of the fathers).

The fathers of the young women also exhibited a number of inconsistencies in their expectations for their daughters and for women in general. For the most part, the fathers embrace somewhat traditional views on women's roles. For example, nearly half the fathers think a son's education is more important; they have given limited encouragement to their daughters regarding career plans; around 40 percent of them think women's primary responsibilities are home and family and that a woman should work only if she has time beyond family responsibilities. At the same time, fathers express support for women to be competitive with men in college and in employment situations. On at least two of the items, the fathers were more positive than the mothers in their expectations for their daughters.

It is of interest to note that parents have higher expectations for women when they are considering an issue in relation to their daughter. When the parents of the women were asked questions pertaining to women's roles in general, they were much less apt to respond in a strong positive way than when they were asked similar questions (on the first set of questions) which specifically related to their own daughters. Another point of interest is that the parents of the female students are, for the most part, somewhat more positive in their expectations for women than the parents of the male students. Apparently, having a daughter ready to attend college has caused parents of the women to embrace some of the current social trends regarding women's issues in comparison to the parents of the men. So, even though the young woman is more apt to be receiving conflicting, inconsistent messages from her parents, the messages from both her mother and her father are somewhat more positive regarding women's roles than those of the mothers and the fathers of the male students.

Earlier in this paper, in giving return rates for the questionnaire, it was reported that there were 30 unidentified parents of men who had responded. While these were not considered in the above analyses, it was noted that these respondents not only failed to indicate on their forms whether they were mothers or fathers of entering male students, but they also failed to answer many of the questions on the instrument. Often as many as 12 to 15 percent of the responses for parents of the men showed up as missing observations. This was in contrast to the responses from a much larger number of parents of women, for which there were no missing observations. One may speculate that parents of men may have been indifferent, ambivalent, or simply unwilling to express opinions on a questionnaire which appears to be geared to "women's issues."

In summary, the difference in the views of the mothers and the fathers of the women plus the inconsistencies in the mothers' views and in the fathers' views provide a basis for speculating that today's young woman receives many mixed messages within the family as to what is expected of her. It seems likely that she would have difficulty in formulating her academic-vocational goals when her parents share different views from each other. And the difficulty may be increased even more when each parent has an inconsistent set of expectations for women in general. One may further speculate that the inconsistent, contradictory messages received in the home contribute to the uncertain, vascillating academic-vocational goals so typical of young women.

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TABLE 1

Summary of Chi-Square Analyses for Questions on Parents' Expectations for Their Child

Question	χ^2 Values: Parents of Women	χ^2 Values: Parents of Men
1. Do you feel it is more important for your son(s) to have a college education than it is for your daughter?	40.23**	2.48
2. Does your daughter (son) have strong vocational plans?	7.38	2.92
3. Do you feel that your daughter (son) will graduate from the University?	3.78	0.93
4. Do you feel that your daughter (son) will be a leader in her (his) professional field?	2.17	0.24
5. Parents of Women: Do you feel that it is important for your daughter to be able to support herself for the rest of her life?	25.97**	--

**$p < .01$

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Question	χ^2 Values: Parents of Women	χ^2 Values: Parents of Men
5. Parents of Men: If you have a daughter(s), do you feel it is important that she be able to support herself for the rest of her life?	--	5.67
6. Do you feel that if your daughter achieved too highly in her college work it hinders her chances of marriage?	11.29**	--
7. Have you encouraged your daughter (son) to have strong vocational plans?	27.36**	1.23
8. Parents of Women: After she graduates, do you feel that your daughter would be capable of supervising a group of men in her professional field?	1.50	--
Parents of Men: After he graduates, do you feel your son should be willing to work for a female supervisor?	--	2.57

**$p < .01$

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

Question	χ^2 Values: Parents of Women	χ^2 Values: Parents of Men
9. Is your daughter (son) entering the field of study which you feel is best for her (him)?	1.22	4.49

**$p < .01$

TABLE 2

Summary of Chi-Square Analyses for Questions on Parents' Attitudes Toward Role Expectations

Question	χ^2 Values	
	Parents of Women	Parents of Men
1. An education is more important for a man than for a woman.	78.76**	10.55**
2. A woman who is a high achiever in her field loses her femininity.	36.33**	16.38**
3. Men have more of an inner need to achieve in a career than women do.	13.86**	4.08
4. Women should not be competitive with men as university students.	9.31*	5.82
5. Women should not be competitive with men on the job.	22.70**	4.45
6. Young men still have a right to expect their wives to stay home and raise a family rather than to pursue a career.	38.69**	12.03**
7. A young woman should at some point in time be able to depend upon a husband to support her.	11.37**	6.75

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

TABLE 2 (cont'd)

Question	χ^2 Values: Parents of Women	χ^2 Values: Parents of Men
8. A young woman should plan to be able to support herself for the rest of her life.	15.78**	20.99**
9. Men should be willing to work for a female supervisor.	26.77**	6.90
10. A woman's primary responsibility is that of looking after her home and family.	15.35**	10.80**
11. A woman should work only if she can find time over and above that required for her home and family responsibilities.	24.20**	6.00
12. If a wife works, it is her responsibility to make arrangements for child care.	33.35**	20.14**
13. A woman's ultimate fulfillment is through the accomplishments of a successful husband.	32.29**	8.01*
14. In general, women are temperamentally unsuited for management positions.	56.86**	12.43**

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

TABLE 2 (cont'd)

Question	χ^2 Values: Parents of Women	χ^2 Values: Parents of Men
15. The high rate of divorce these days is due to the fact that so many women are working outside the home.	12.23**	1.26
16. If a female student achieves too highly in her college work, it will hinder her chances for marriage.	15.25**	4.54

*p < .05

**p < .01